

# REPORT

VOL. 21 NO. 3  
WINTER 2008-09

• **skeptic (n): a person who searches for truth through questioning and reasoning** •

## Elaine-From-Seinfeld Disorder (EFSD)

By Gary P. Posner

*Seinfeld* fans may recall the episode (“The Package”) in which Elaine’s doctor labels her — more than a tad unfairly — as a crank, and how that notation in her medical record haunts her as it finds its way to each new doctor she seeks out. That’s very much what I was reminded of a couple years ago when the FBI file of my “skeptics” mentor, Philip J. Klass, became public. And now it seems that Tampa Bay Skeptics is perhaps being stigmatized as suffering from EFSD — not by the FBI (as far as we know), but by our biggest local newspaper.

But more about TBS later. Let’s begin with Phil Klass, a founding member of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (formerly CSICOP) and long-time senior avionics editor at *Aviation Week & Space Technology* magazine (known as the “Bible of the aerospace industry”), who from the 1960s until his death in 2005 was universally recognized as the world’s leading UFO skeptic.

In early 2006, the Computer UFO Network obtained what is purported to be (and appears so to my inexperienced eyes) Klass’s genuine FBI file. CUFON’s cover letter stated that the documents comprised the “releasable” portions of the file, with others being withheld by the FBI on national security grounds.

According to the file, in 1958 an Air Force District Commander notified the FBI of Klass’ “unauthorized disclosure of information classified ‘Secret’ in an *Aviation Week Magazine* article.” Klass’ detractors generally portrayed him as being in bed with the U.S. government. To the contrary, this episode tends to suggest that, as Phil often stated, he would have blown the lid off the government’s so-called “UFO cover-up” had he found evidence of any such conspiracy. Though the FBI now had him in its sights, they hadn’t yet “diagnosed” him with EFSD.

A heavily redacted (as many of these are) 1965 document involves an allegation of some sort of activity related to “radio transmitting equipment” in Klass’ apartment. Some of his detractors may have fantasized that if he was not in bed with our government, perhaps he

was sending our secrets to his Soviet handlers. After all, as a result of his knowledge of Defense Department secrets, Klass had indeed been approached by Boris and Natasha from time to time. Another 1965 report notes that Phil “telephonically contacted the [FBI’s] Washington Field Office [advising] he was having lunch that date with . . .” (the remaining half of the page was redacted). To the feds, Klass was a complex character, but they still had not tagged him with EFSD.

Now for the morsels that will tickle the fancies of die-hard *Seinfeld* fans. A decade later, Klass “telephoned the Bureau and spoke with the Editor of the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin (LEB). In strong terms laced with sarcasm, he derided our publication of the article by Dr. J. Allen Hynek, ‘The UFO Mystery.’ . . . Klass suggested that by publishing this article, the FBI had given its endorsement to a hoax (that UFOs are extraterrestrial in origin) and to a fraud (Dr. J. Allen Hynek).” This report goes on to say that Klass conveyed the negative results of his exhaustive research into UFOs. But the FBI defended its LEB article by asserting that “nowhere . . . does Hynek suggest that UFOs are extraterrestrial in origin.” Hynek was the founder of the Center for UFO Studies and endorsed a number of cases which, if genuine, could have no conceivable explanation other than alien visitation. Further, “As to the suggestion that the author is a fraud [I hope Phil didn’t actually use that word], Klass was informed that Hynek is a widely respected scientist . . . affiliated with a leading university.” It then says Phil opined that Hynek probably wouldn’t remain so for long, but that “Klass would not elaborate on this statement, nor was he requested to do so.” I can imagine the Hoover-trained agent pondering whether Klass planned to have Hynek killed, or just fired. “The conversation was concluded,” the report states, “when Klass suggested that we might be interested in publishing an article by a newly formed organization called the ‘Center for Unidentified Ghosts.’” Then this observation: “In view of Klass’ intemperate criticism and often irrational statements he made to support it, we should be most circumspect in any future contacts with him.” And as with Elaine in *Seinfeld*, that stigma was to follow Phil for the duration.

(continued on page 5)

### TAMPA BAY SKEPTICS Statement of Purpose and "\$1,000 Challenge"

Tampa Bay Skeptics, Inc., a Special Interest Group of the Center For Inquiry/Tampa, is a nonprofit educational and scientific organization devoted to the critical examination of paranormal and fringe-science claims. TBS does not reject claims on *a priori* grounds, but rather is committed to objective and critical inquiry.

TBS's "\$1,000 Challenge" is open to anyone claiming verifiable scientific proof of the reality of ESP, UFOs, dowsing, astrology, or any paranormal phenomenon. Please contact us for details.

*Tampa Bay Skeptics Report* is published quarterly. We welcome news clippings, and articles and letters for publication (subject to editing for length, clarity, and taste), and solicit opposing points of view.

Views expressed in articles and letters are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of Tampa Bay Skeptics or Center For Inquiry/Tampa.

### TAMPA BAY SKEPTICS REPORT Since 1988

c/o Center For Inquiry / Tampa  
5201 W. Kennedy Blvd.  
Suite 124

Tampa, FL 33609

Phone: (813) 849-7571

Fax: (813) 849-7572

E-mail: [tbs@centerforinquiry.net](mailto:tbs@centerforinquiry.net)

Web: [www.tampabayskeptics.org](http://www.tampabayskeptics.org)

Founder and Editor:  
Gary P. Posner

Cartoonist:  
Don Addis

\$15/yr. (4 issues)

© 2008 by  
Tampa Bay Skeptics and  
Center For Inquiry/Tampa

All rights reserved.  
Publications may quote if  
appropriate credit is given.

## Chairman's

### o r n e r

## How to Argue With a Believer

By Terry A. Smiljanich

When you are discussing a paranormal topic with true believers, how can you convince them that they need to reconsider their opinions? Martin Gardner, author of many books and an icon in the skeptical world, suggests asking the non-skeptic a simple question: "What would it take for you to change your mind?" More often than not, a true believer will answer, "Nothing. I know what I believe is true and that's the end of it." Having elicited this answer, the skeptic can be excused for declining further discussion with such a closed mind.

Skeptics can easily answer such a question — all it would take is credible evidence. I don't personally believe in supernatural beings. What would it take for me to change my belief? If I saw a vision in the sky of Jesus Christ holding his chest open and showing his "Blessed Heart," and everyone around me said they were seeing the same thing, and the evening news reported that this vision was seen by everyone around the world looking up at the same time, and had the video to prove it, I would say, "O.K., you've got me." I would have to believe either: 1) some previously unknown form of mass hysteria was at work; 2) alien beings were playing a huge practical joke on us; or 3) Jesus Christ is Lord. Given the three choices, all of them almost equally improbable, I would probably opt for #3 and start going to church every Sunday (and tell those going to synagogues or mosques to change their affiliations). Wouldn't you?

Likewise, a repeatable, well-controlled experiment, thoroughly tested and confirmed by the relevant scientific community, which demonstrates the presence of ESP, would convince me that such a seemingly paranormal phenomenon truly exists in the natural world.

What would it take for Christians to stop believing in the biblical god? What proof would they consider sufficient? Even if a huge apparition of Shiva appeared and told the world that the Christian bible was bunk, wouldn't they just claim that it was the work of the devil trying to tempt mankind?

What test would convince a believer that ESP is not a demonstrable phenomenon in the natural world? When TBS has tested a supposed psychic such as Virginia Levy, and she fails utterly to demonstrate any paranormal abilities, was that sufficient for her to change her beliefs and admit she has no such powers? No, there's always an excuse ("I wasn't really trying"), even if made up afterwards. What would it take for people to stop believing that Sylvia Browne talks to the dead, or that Uri Geller bends spoons with his mind? Anything? He was caught using a common magician's trick? "Well, maybe *that* time, but he really *can* do these things! I've seen it!"

Some people think that open-mindedness means a recognition that "anything's possible." The problem with that definition is that if anything's possible, everything becomes believable. And if everything is believable, then there's no distinction between a flat earth and a round earth, or between ghosts and mirages. No, the true test of open-mindedness is the admission that better proof could convince you to change your skepticism to belief, or your belief to skepticism.

Asking "What would it take for you to change your mind?" early in any discussion with believers will probably elicit an answer demonstrating the futility of further conversation. And if their mind is obviously closed, there's no sense in going on. They won't like hearing that, but how can they argue?



**BOOK REVIEW**

*The Undercover Philosopher: A Guide to Detecting Shams, Lies, and Delusions* by Michael Philips (One World Publications, Oxford, England, 2008). 300 pages. \$16.95.

**Reviewed by Ron Cooper**

Readers of *TBS Report* surely agree that we should be ever vigilant for chicanery, slight-of-hand, and sophisticated rackets that rely upon our gullibility and inattention. We skeptics feel a certain sense of duty to help others hone their baloney-detecting skills and guard against swindlers of all sorts. Michael Philips has distilled his sense of duty in the pages of *The Undercover Philosopher: A Guide to Detecting Shams, Lies, and Delusions*. His concerns, however, are not the typical scam-mongers that skeptics target, although he agrees that we have work aplenty to be done on them. Philips points out weaknesses in our ordinary thinking and proceeds to show how those weaknesses become amplified and, worse, institutionalized in organizations that he terms “knowledge machines.”

The first third of the book explores limits to our experience and several sorts of faulty reasoning. Philips reminds us that we already know that seeing is not always believing and that our memories are notoriously unreliable, but we are reluctant to admit just how mistaken we can be about our own perceptions. Our experiences are shaped by our expectations, and our memories are highly responsive to suggestion. We want events to occur and to be remembered in certain ways, and we prepare ourselves to accept and interpret sensations according to a pre-fab template. Further, our brains are impatient with gaps in our memories and thereby leap at almost any filler, preferably filler that fits the template. Add to those limitations our tendencies of reason that are not always good habits. Philips covers some of our common logical errors as well as offering illustrative examples of hasty generalizations, confirmation bias, and misunderstanding probabilities.

Those concerns are preparation for the real theme of this book, Philips’ notion of “knowledge machines.” Professions like law and medicine, academic areas like chemistry and sociology, and organizations like industries and political groups are, in an important sense,

communities whose operations rely upon producing knowledge. We like to think that these structures have rigorous, self-correcting practices, but Philips’ purpose is to show that all those epistemological failings that are evident in individuals get translated to groups. The difference is that what are mere foibles at the individual level become serious dangers at the group level.

In the same way that individuals hold tightly to cherished beliefs, knowledge machines exhibit great inertia regarding their fundamental principles and the introduction of new methods. Take for example criminology’s reliance upon lie detectors, our courts’ use of eyewitnesses, or psychology’s diagnoses of childhood sexual abuse. Similarly, in the same way that individuals are driven by selfishness, scientific research is often led by the need to bring prestige to a university, the willingness to pursue a project that will please a grant-funding source, or the necessity to justify the claims of one’s employer (think of the researchers who worked for the tobacco industry). Also, knowledge machines, just like individuals, will often proclaim objectivity when value judgments are involved (think of psychiatry’s designation of certain behaviors as diseases). Finally, unlike individuals, knowledge machines suffer from maladies that are endemic to organizational structures, particularly problems with hierarchical authority and information flow.

Philips warns that two extreme characterizations of knowledge machines will impede any attempts to correct some of these flaws. One extreme is scientism. We all learned in high school about the scientific method in which the researcher constructs a hypothesis, designs tests, gathers evidence, formulates a conclusion, etc. Done with sincerity, the method must produce truth. That characterization, says Philips, is naïve. The other extreme is postmodernism, which maintains that any version of the truth is as good as any other. Neither of these will do, of course, but we can glean valuable lessons from each. The trickier point is that settling for a middle ground is simplistic.

The final chapter considers two oft-anthologized essays, W. K. Clifford’s “The Ethics of Belief” and William James’ “The Will to Believe.” Clifford sets a fairly high standard of evidence for what we should accept as true, while James famously argues that the decision to accept or reject an assertion rarely relies

(continued on page 6)

**TAMPA BAY SKEPTICS EXECUTIVE COUNCIL**

CHAIRMAN: Terry A. Smiljanich, J.D., Tampa (James, Hoyer, Newcomer & Smiljanich, P.A.)

VICE CHAIRMAN: Jack H. Robinson, Ed.D. (Professor emeritus, Astronomy program, University of South Florida, Tampa)

EXEC. DIR.: Gary P. Posner, M.D., Tampa (Scientific consultant, Committee for Skeptical Inquiry [CSI — formerly CSICOP])

AT LARGE: James W. Lett, Ph.D. (Professor of Anthropology, Indian River Community College, Fort Pierce)

AT LARGE: William W. Hall (Professor, Dept. of Communications, St. Petersburg College)

BOARD OF DIRECTORS: Gary P. Posner, Terry A. Smiljanich, Jack H. Robinson

## Snippets

One of our Spring "Snippets" reported that the British Ministry of Defence, following in France's 2007 footsteps, would be releasing about 160 of its heretofore secret UFO-related files this spring. Well, they decided to keep their cover-up going for several more months, and even then a paltry 19 incidents were revealed, but at least we now know the startling truth about those. Perhaps the most important document of the lot is a March 1990 letter about a spaceship that crash-landed during World War II. Per that letter, "The crashed vehicle contained two males from Spectra, a planet orbiting the star Zeta Tucanae, and a female from one of the two inhabited planets in the Sirius system, Amazon, the planet of warrior women. That female was me." For some reason, this letter failed to spark an investigation.

(AFP News via the Internet, Oct. 20)

During the deep freeze of the Cold War, an American pilot based in England may have nearly initiated a torrid interplanetary war. According to another of the recently released MoD documents, airman Milton Torres was ordered that day in 1957 to open fire on a UFO. Said Torres, who now resides in Miami, "It was so fast, it was so incredible. It was absolutely death-defying." But he never actually made visual contact with the UFO — it was just a radar blip (though of "incredible intensity") — and for that reason he never fired a shot. And as the late Phil Klass would point out, after radar converted to digital processors a couple decades later, radar-related UFO cases virtually evaporated, confirming that most had been the result of spurious echoes.

(St. Pete. Times, Oct. 21)

Here's another possible reason why a potentially disastrous interplanetary war has not yet been initiated in the skies of Britain: Phil Dampier, co-author of *What's in the Queen's Handbag*, reports that Elizabeth "has always been superstitious and carries an amazing array of good-luck charms." He adds that most have been given to her by her children. So, if and when Charles ascends to the throne, perhaps he will continue the tradition and thus delay the star wars for a future generation.

(Parade magazine, Oct. 12)

Though we have met with a few successes, groups such as TBS have had relatively little effect upon the worldwide belief in paranormal phenomena. Sheikh Saleh al-Fozan, a member of Saudi Arabia's Higher Council of Clerics, seems a bit miffed that many Arab satellite channels are now devoted to dispensing astrological advice to callers, and has come up with this peachy idea: "Sorcerers who appear on satellite channels . . . have committed a great crime . . . and the

Muslim consensus is that the apostate's punishment is death by the sword." Sheikh Saleh al-Lohaidan, head of Saudi Arabia's Islamic sharia courts, chimed in, "I want to warn the owners of these channels . . . of the consequences. . . . They can be put to death through the judicial process." And as for the callers to these shows, al-Fozan would allow them to live, but they "should not be accorded Muslim rites when they die."

(Reuters via the Internet, Sept. 14)

A bit closer to home, the October 1 episode of the Sci Fi Channel's *Ghost Hunters* series, titled "Ghosts of the Sunshine State," featured St. Petersburg's Renaissance Vinoy Resort and Golf Club. Though this article appeared hours before the program's airing, the show may have included (as did the book *Haunted Baseball*) first-hand accounts from players who have stayed at the Vinoy when in town to play the Tampa Bay Rays. Some of them have reported seeing a ghostly man attired in 1920s-era clothing, as well as the typical poltergeisty tales of faucets and lights turning on and off, doors opening and closing, etc., for no apparent reason. As well as haunted, the hotel had been hounded, for years, by producers of such TV fare. But the management wanted no part of it until they heard about a bed and breakfast whose business began booming following such publicity.

(St. Pete. Times, Oct. 1)



Among the "Ig Nobel" prizes bestowed at Harvard this year by the *Annals of Improbable Research* was this gem in the Physics category: To Dorian Raymer and Douglas Smith, for proving that heaps of string or hair will inevitably tangle. Though hair stylists have known of this phenomenon for centuries, string theorists were thrown into a black hole of despair and are now desperately scrambling to comprehend the ramifications.

(St. Pete. Times, Oct. 3)

"Snippets" are derived from the referenced sources and then rewritten by TBS Report's editor. Please submit your clippings to TBS.



### “Elaine-From-Seinfeld Disorder” (from page 1)

Later in 1975 an internal note about a follow-up letter from Phil, in which he described Dr. Hynek as “the spiritual leader of the vocal group of ‘believers’ and ‘kooks’ who claim that we are being visited by extraterrestrial spaceships,” contained this: “Klass is deficient on all points of his argument, particularly concerning the credentials of Dr. Hynek, which could scarcely be better. . . . On the other hand, Klass has no such sterling reputation and has twice been under FBI investigation in connection with the unauthorized publication of classified information.” In actuality, Klass, dubbed the “Sherlock Holmes of Ufology” by a book reviewer, left this earth as one of the most honored aerospace journalists of all time, whereas Hynek made no such mark in astronomy and utterly failed to elevate UFOs to the stature of serious science. But to the FBI, Klass was an EFSD crank.

Klass eventually became a good friend of mine and an admirer of *TBS Report* (I also edited his own UFO-related newsletter). He would often send me photocopies of his correspondence with UFO proponents, who seemed to appreciate his probing questions and biting sarcasm about as much as the FBI did. But it was to my utter surprise that a good portion of Klass’ FBI file relates to the Bureau’s policies regarding “psychic detectives,” specifically Noreen Renier, whom I first met in 1986 and about whom I have subsequently written volumes in *TBS Report* and elsewhere. In a 1987 letter, Klass inquired about the “official views of the FBI on the use of ‘psychics’ to assist in FBI investigations.” Five pertinent questions then followed. The FBI responded by explaining that “although the Bureau has never contracted psychics as consultants, it is possible that individual Special Agents may have encountered people who have volunteered information based on their psychic impressions [which] would be handled in the same manner as leads obtained from other sources. The FBI does not endorse or recommend the use of psychics in law enforcement [Q: Is this because no credible evidence exists that “psychic” power is genuine? A: Hardly. The sentence continues.] partially because the information obtained is frequently inconclusive. However, we do acknowledge that many police departments . . . have

### “UFO Abduction” vs. “Truman Syndrome”

The November 30 St. Petersburg Times carried an A.P. story titled “Mental patients feeling like ‘Truman’: Doctors report patients who feel like involuntary stars in a staged world.” Psychiatrist Joel Gold and his psychologist brother are preparing a scholarly article about an increasing number of people (50 known so far) who seem convinced that they are living staged lives à la the 1998 movie *The Truman Show*.

Citing the reality TV genre, Gold asks, “Is there sort of a perfect storm of the culture we’re in, in which fame holds such high value [as to induce this] grandiose delusion?”

Those who ask such questions about “UFO abductees” are excoriated by “abductionists” who insist that their patients’ experiences are real. Will a comparable cadre of “Trumanists” emerge, touting a parallel-dimensional explanation?

—Gary Posner

relied on this type of assistance.” And, as was typical, an internal “Note” was affixed to the letter, reminding the reader of Klass’ reputation for “intemperate criticism and often irrational statements,” with the continuing recommendation that “the Bureau be most circumspect in any future contacts with him.” Damn that EFSD label!

Klass replied months later, “What I do find surprising is that the FBI would give the appearance of endorsement of ‘psychic criminal investigators’ by inviting such a claimant to speak before large groups of local law enforcement officials.” In response, the FBI indicated that its “National Academy, as an educational facility, has an obligation to offer a full range of courses. . . . Attendees of several . . . classes expressed interest in the topic. . . . The FBI does not believe that objective presentation of controversial subjects in an academic environment should be construed as endorsement.” As always, the obligatory Klass-is-a-crank EFSD “Note” was appended.

Oblivious to the FBI’s dismissive attitude toward him, Klass persisted. “What is open to challenge is the question of whether Ms. Noreen Renier [this is the only sentence in the file in which, by apparent oversight, her name was not redacted] . . . is ‘an appropriate lecturer’ to make an ‘objective presentation on the subject.’ . . . If, as I suspect, the Academy offers a much more balanced presentation on the polygraph, might it not be well advised to use a similar protocol in the future on ‘psychic detectives’?” The Bureau replied that Klass’ letter would be forwarded “to the FBI’s Training Division for its consideration of your views.” The attached EFSD notation, this time about Klass’ history of “accusatory or argumentative” correspondence, was lengthier than the letter itself! And perhaps in part due to the FBI’s ludicrous labeling of Klass as an unstable crank, Noreen Renier has gone on to become one of the most famous “psychic detectives” in America, with a memoir in print

(continued on page 6)

### Tampa Bay Skeptics T-Shirts

TBST T-shirts (S, M, L, XXL and XXXL) are available from the CFI/Tampa office. 100% cotton, black, crew style, no pocket, with TBS name/logo in white across the chest.

The shirts are \$10 each (plus \$4 total per order if shipping is required). Make check payable to “Tampa Bay Skeptics.”

## TAMPA BAY SKEPTICS CONSULTANTS

Judith Becker Bryant, Ph.D.  
Psychology Dept.  
Univ. of South Florida (USF)  
Tampa

Charles R. Mathews, M.D.  
Former Asst. Sec. for Health Services  
Florida Dept. of Corrections  
Tallahassee

Vincent E. Parr, Ph.D.  
Clinical psychologist  
Tampa

James "The Amazing" Randi  
Magician, author  
Plantation

Daryl L. Schrader  
Dept. of Mathematics  
St. Petersburg College

Alan L. Soli, Ph.D.  
Dept. of Chemistry  
Eckerd College  
St. Petersburg

## Other Skeptical Sources on the Paranormal

### • Prometheus Books •

120-page catalog  
(30% discount if ordered via TBS)  
59 John Glenn Dr.  
Amherst, NY 14228  
(800) 421-0351  
[www.prometheusbooks.com](http://www.prometheusbooks.com)

### • Skeptical Inquirer •

Published by CSI (formerly CSICOP)  
Box 703  
Amherst, NY 14226  
(716) 636-1425  
[www.csicop.org](http://www.csicop.org)

### • Skeptic •

Published by the Skeptics Society  
P.O. Box 338  
Altadena, CA 91001  
(818) 794-3119  
[www.skeptic.com](http://www.skeptic.com)

### • James Randi Educ. Foundation •

201 S.E. 12th St.  
Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33316-1815  
(954) 467-1112  
[www.randi.org](http://www.randi.org)

And check out the TBS website's  
full page of "Resource Links"

## "Book Review" (from page 3)

purely upon evidence. Philips concludes that the demands of everyday life (we have neither the time nor the resources to check the evidence of every assertion that comes along) make Clifford's standards unattainable. Besides, Philips says, "Most of us are ill-equipped to walk in Socrates' sandals, and most of the rest don't want to." Nevertheless, we must do our best to be able to recognize the charlatans and flimflammers as well as the deceptive tendencies of organizations, and we should "build monuments" to the skeptics and debunkers. (Hear, hear!)

Do not expect the entertainment we skeptics enjoy when James Randi or Penn & Teller expose frauds in their inimitable ways. Nor will you find clever devices for detecting hoaxes and humbug. *The Undercover Philosopher* is an important achievement of a different sort. Knowledge machines are in the business of churning out "truths," and when those "truths" fall short, an entire society can suffer. Philips' insights into how these machines work present a model exercise in baloney detection and prevention.

*Ron Cooper, Ph.D., teaches philosophy at Central Florida Community College and is the author of Hume's Fork.*

• • • • •

## "EFSD" (from page 5)

and frequent media appearances, including on CNN and Court TV (now truTV).

On a smaller scale (at least we are not aware of an FBI file on us), TBS may be "earning" an EFSD reputation of our own within the *St. Petersburg Times* as a result of the fiasco surrounding Emily Nipps' August 8 article about us (see Fall 2008, page 8). The online version of that article was posted on the

morning of August 7, at which time I noticed that a series of false and defamatory accusations against me by "psychic" Virginia Levy, who had failed a TBS "\$1,000 Challenge" a decade ago, were included, absent even a word of rebuttal from me. I called Nipps to complain and in the hopes that, before the print version appeared the next day, she could add a sentence the effect that I disputed Levy's characterization of having been mistreated and "scammed." However, that section of the paper had already been printed. But I was astonished when Nipps said that even if that were not the case, and even if I were to rush her the video (which we subsequently have made available on YouTube) exposing Levy's charges as bogus, she would still refuse to include my denial in the article or even ask her editor to print a future "Clarification." Instead, she dismissed my complaint as meritless and opined that I was simply averse to criticism. (In reality, I relish it and feature a "Critics" page on my website.) She was agreeable to a "Correction" notice of her error in placing me on a TV show when it had actually been TBS chairman Terry Smiljanich, but I preferred no "Correction" at all to one that ignored the far more serious matter.

About a month later, Terry received an e-mail from Arleen Spenceley, a *Times* editorial assistant, who was working on a free-lance magazine story about the A&E TV show *Paranormal State* and desired TBS's perspective. Because she had read the Nipps article but perhaps not the "Letter to the Editor" from Terry and me that had run a week later (which, in an e-mail to me, Nipps characterized as "fair"), I advised Spenceley that Levy's after-the-fact excuses and bitter charges against TBS (and me personally) were untrue, and

(continued on page 8)



## Letters • Readers' Forum

Editor: I enjoyed Terry Smiljanich's poking fun at Edgar Mitchell in "Astronauts, UFOs, and Logic" in the last issue. But one can also add that there is a scientific reason "Why Visiting Alien Spaceships Are Impossible." That is the title of my June 2008 article in *Skeptical Briefs* [the quarterly newsletter of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, publishers of the bimonthly *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine].

The argument is that the interplanetary distances are so vast that a spaceship has to go at one-tenth the speed of light to get to us in a reasonable time (like 100 years). The energy (kinetic) to reach this velocity is so huge that it is beyond the capability of any civilization. Remember that the vehicle has to carry its own fuel, and the laws of physics and chemistry are the same everywhere in the Universe.

Sid Deutsch  
Sarasota  
siddeutsch@ieee.org  
www.siddeutsch.org

Editor: I am sorry for my late arrival at the September TBS meeting. My staff had entered the meeting time on my schedule as noon rather than 11:00. As I walked in at 12:03 I remember thinking how I admired an organization that could start a meeting on time!

I didn't join in the discussion as this was my first meeting, but had I added a comment, it would have been in a form of question on a couple of points. I do not believe in "God" in any sense referred to by those present, but I am probably happy that many others do.

My question: If everybody suddenly had no "religion," how would the world be different? Would there be "morality" of any kind? One of those present

mentioned his "faith" in the "market system" to solve the problems of the country (or maybe he said "the world"). Is that a form of "religion" that depends on the "faith" of the "consumers" to sustain its success? Maybe all of these things have been discussed and perhaps even solved somewhere else. If so, I would enjoy a reference to the solution so that I could read about it quietly.

As a closing comment, I recommend James L. Halperin's novel, *The First Immortal*. It is great to stimulate out-of-the-box thinking about the "soul" basically being the electrical makeup of the brain.

I look forward to the next meeting.

Bill Wagner  
Tampa  
bwagner1@tampabay.rr.com

*The following is excerpted/edited from a Letter to the Editor sent to Skeptical Inquirer and then forwarded to us by S.I. editor Kendrick Frazier:*

Editor: I just wanted to say how much I liked the most recent issue of *S.I.* (Nov./Dec. 2008). Although the entire issue was a knock-out, I thought the piece on "psychic" Noreen Renier titled "A Mind for Murdergate" [a nearly identical version of the lead article in our last issue of *TBS Report*] was especially powerful.

A key weakness in mainstream media is the lack of this type of follow-up of claims by people (not restricted to paranormal topics). Because of Gary Posner's careful review of Renier's claims, we can see a casual disregard for the facts in favor of shameless self-promotion. Bravo to *S.I.* for keeping track of people like Renier who make extraordinary claims!

Michael R. Dennett  
Federal Way, Washington

### MEMBERSHIP / SUBSCRIPTION / DONATION / BACK-ORDER FORM

TBS Membership Options: ☐ \$15 for TBS membership only ☐ \$60 for Center For Inquiry/Tampa membership, including TBS\*  
☐ This is a renewal. ☐ Donation of \$ \_\_\_\_\_ enclosed. \* For 1st-time TBS membership only

Other options: ☐ \$15 for *Tampa Bay Skeptics Report* subscription only (not TBS or CFI membership) ☐ This is a renewal.  
☐ \$60 for Center For Inquiry/Tampa membership only (not including TBS) ☐ This is a renewal.

☐ The following back issues of *TBS Report* are requested (\$1 each): \_\_\_\_\_

Make TBS-only checks payable to "Tampa Bay Skeptics" and CFI checks payable to "Center For Inquiry/Tampa" and mail to:

Center For Inquiry/Tampa  
5201 W. Kennedy Blvd., Suite 124  
Tampa, FL 33609



## Announcing . . . Tampa Bay Skeptics Quarterly Meetings

Last Saturday of every March, June, September,  
and December (barring special circumstances)

Our next meeting will be:

**SATURDAY, DECEMBER 27**

11:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M.

**TBS HOME OFFICE (AT CFI/TAMPA)**

**BRIDGEPORT CENTER BUILDING**

**5201 W. KENNEDY BLVD., SUITE 124, TAMPA**

(Next building westward from West Shore Plaza)

**Scheduled:** Jim Peterson (President, Tampa Bay  
Post Carbon Council), video of TV coverage of the  
paranormal, plus other fun stuff

Followed by optional lunch at a local restaurant

Press and  
Public  
Welcome

### Visit TBS's Award-Winning Website

[www.tampabayskeptics.org](http://www.tampabayskeptics.org)

If for no other reasons, check out the web versions of our  
*TBS Report* articles for their related links and for the occa-  
sional graphics not present in our printed newsletters due to  
space constraints.

And send us your **e-mail address** if you would like to be  
added to our **TBS Update Service**.

### TBS and James Randi "Psychic" Challenges

Tampa Bay Skeptics has a standing "\$1,000 Challenge"  
for scientific proof of any paranormal phenomenon.

The James Randi Educational Foundation will award its  
fully secured **\$1,000,000** jackpot to the first person able to  
successfully demonstrate paranormal power for Randi.

These monetary rewards, and a place in history, await  
the first successful candidates. All UFOlogists, psychics,  
astrologers, dowers, and the like are encouraged to come  
forward and offer your proof. See the "\$\$\$ Challenges" page  
on the TBS website or contact us for more details.

### "Elaine-From-Seinfeld Disorder" (from page 6)

maliciously so. That prompted Nipps to caution  
Spenceley that "before you think about dealing with  
these people, I'd urge you to call me first so I can  
share my experience with you." No doubt, that would  
involve tarring TBS with the EFSD label.

In response, I suggested to Spenceley that she also  
contact Kathy Fountain at Ch. 13, on whose show  
Terry and I have appeared about a dozen times, for  
another opinion about us.

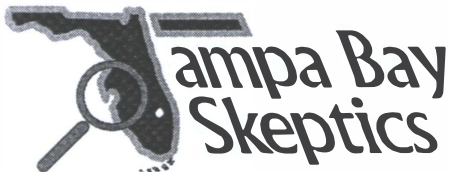
Nipps had earlier asserted to me on the phone that  
she had not breached any journalistic standards by  
publishing Levy's charges against me while denying  
me a rejoinder. If that is ethical practice, it certainly  
explains a lot about what now passes for journalism in  
this country, which I would label as NFFP — not fit  
for print.

### Center For Inquiry / Tampa

As the opening paragraph of its website explains,  
Center for Inquiry/Tampa (of which Tampa Bay Skeptics is a  
Special Interest Group) offers an opportunity to put your  
principles into practice by joining other rationalists in working  
for positive change in society. CFI/Tampa sponsors social  
events for freethinkers as well as intellectual programming,  
and assists with campus outreach.

One ongoing event, the lecture series on the third  
Saturday of each month at 11:00 a.m., often covers topics  
that may be of particular interest to TBS members.

For more information on upcoming CFI/Tampa events,  
visit their website ([www.CenterForInquiry.net/Tampa](http://www.CenterForInquiry.net/Tampa)) or  
contact them by mail (5201 W. Kennedy Blvd., Suite 124,  
Tampa, FL 33609), e-mail ([Tampa@CenterForInquiry.net](mailto:Tampa@CenterForInquiry.net)),  
phone (813-849-7571), or fax (813-849-7572).



c/o Center For Inquiry / Tampa  
5201 W. Kennedy Blvd., Suite 124  
Tampa, FL 33609



A Special Interest Group of the



TBS wishes you a  
**FIRST CLASS**  
Holiday Season and

